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ABSTRACT

A review of literature shows that culture shock is a complex phenomenon characterized by discomfort and anxiety resulting from difficulty in interacting in an unfamiliar social and communicative context. Difficulty arises not from unfamiliar "rules" of behavior but from the intangibility of differences in cultural values, expectations, and roles. It occurs on the part of both host and foreign visitor. Physiological changes are not uncommon, and may include fatigue from heightened stimulation. Some researchers suggest that culture shock is closely related to language learning, and that it is a necessary step in gaining communicative competence in the host language. Learning linguistic skills alone is not adequate for either alleviating culture shock or achieving communicative competence. Teaching about culture shock appears to enable people to cope better with it, and teachers of English as a Second Language often use simulation, mini-drama, study of literature, reading units, and/or discussion as teaching techniques. A number of classroom activities addressing aspects culture shock are suggested, particularly for students at lower levels of English language instruction. Contains 15 references. (MSE)

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The nature of culture shock: ideas for lower level students

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Abstract

Culture shock is a complex phenomenon which poses problems for ESL teachers at all levels. It is particularly difficult for teachers of lower level students because materials are generally prepared for more advanced speakers of English. While the symptoms of culture shock are generally known, other aspects of culture shock, such as its physiological effects or its relationship to communicative competence, are not such common knowledge. This paper reviews the nature of culture shock and offers some suggestions for teachers of lower level students.

Review

Sojourners exploring foreign lands have always grappled with the ups and downs of acculturation. When culture shock appears, it can send the unprepared, as well as the prepared, traveller into a tailspin. The stricken may feel any of an assortment of symptoms ranging from boredom and excessive sleepiness to debilitating depression (Bennett, 1977) (Barna, 1976). Two questions teachers and trainers of ESL students ask are, "How can I prepare my students?" and "Does preparation really help?" This paper will attempt to answer these questions by briefly reviewing the nature of culture shock and then presenting suggestions for teachers of lower level ESL students.

Kalervo Oberg was the first to coin the term "culture shock" in the early 1960's (Oberg, 1961). He referred to the entire process of cultural adjustment as culture shock and divided this process into several phases. In recent years it has become more common to refer to culture shock as one stage (usually the second or third stage) in the process of acculturation. Acton and Felix (1986, p. 20) define acculturation as the struggle to adapt to a new culture without forsaking one's own. For

convenience, except when cited differently by another author this paper follows the more recent convention of referring to culture shock as one part of the process of adjusting to a different culture.

Oberg (1961) felt that culture shock was caused by the anxiety resulting from losing all the familiar signs and symbols used to orient oneself in one's own culture. Barna (1976) echos this by stating that in general scholars agree that culture shock is mostly caused by "the reduced ability to interact within the social and communication structure of the different society" (1976, p.6).

Hofstede (1991) and Barna (1976) both explain that the real source of discomfort in culture shock is not the differences in explicit "rules," but the intangibility of differences that stem from a deep culture level. For example, Barna (1976, p.50) explains that though differences in culture such as taking one's shoes off (or leaving them on) in the house may cause irritation, they are easy to understand. However, recognizing and understanding differences at a deeper level- in the areas of values, expectations, or roles- is not easy and this is where great anxiety is generally produced. Similarly, Hofstede (1991) writes that it is easy for a foreign visitor to follow some of the rules of the new culture, such as when or how to greet, how to give presents and so forth; however, the visitor "probably cannot recognize let alone feel the values surrounding those interactions" (1991, p. 209).

Another facet of culture that is often overlooked is the response of the hosts to the foreign visitor. Both Lam (1984) and Hofstede (1991) see culture shock as a two-way street. That is, just as the visitor must adjust to the host, so the host must adjust to the visitor. Zareen Karani Lam (1984, 5.6.4.2.) writes that often both sides lack an awareness of the differences of each party's expectations and values. Hofstede (1991) has

gone a step furthur with this notion and created a small model of the host's adjustment process. He contends that the first phase of the host's adjustment is curiosity, and the second is ethnocentrism as the host will probably judge the visitor by the host's culture. At that point, the host will either remain in the ethnocentric stage or may move into the stage of polycentrism, which is the ability to judge the foreigner according to the foreigner's standards (Hofstede 1991, p.211).

Culture shock is a complex phenomenon at both psychological and cognitive levels, and the dynamic of its relationship to language learning is not yet completely understood (Brown, 1980). Barna (1976) refers to Toffler (1970) to point out that during acculturation our bodies go through tremendous changes in order to deal with the bombardment of new stimuli. She says that:

> "The whole body is in massive change. Extra adrenalin and nonadrenalin pour into the system, general muscle tone rises, pupils of the eyes dilate, sense organs are directed toward the incoming stimuli, palms sweat. This psychological response is in constant operation, even during sleep," (Barna, 1976, p. 51).

She goes on to explain that these physical changes are the result of what psychologists call "orientation response" (Barna 1976, p.51). Every time a person comes in contact with an unfamiliar stimulus, the body regards it as invasive and intruding, so the body becomes super alert as it works to find a way to classify the new information. It is not surprising, then, that living in a new culture is often exhausting, especially in the early months!

Common sense tells us that one way to relieve the disorientation caused by acculturation and culture shock is to learn the language of the

host culture. However, research by Douglas H. Brown (1980) suggests that it is not this simple. He argues that culture shock is intrinsically linked with language learning. He states that if a language learner passes through the stage of culture shock without acquiring a certain amount of communicative competence, he or she will become stuck, linguistically, at a level of functional competence. In other words, the learner's skills in the target language will fossilize (Brown, 1980, p.26).

Brown (1980) and Acton and Felix (1986) both argue that culture shock is imperative to gaining communicative competence in the target language. Acton and Felix (1986) state that it is possible to become reasonably competent in the target language without assimilating very much to the host culture. They explain that this situation is generally the result of becoming linguistically competent in one's native country without exposure to the target culture. Thus, the learner does not gain any cultural competence as he or she builds up linguistic skills. Brown (1980) discusses also discusses this phenomenon. He claims that a person who achieves linguistic competence before the third or fourth stage of acculturation may be less likely to cope psychologically in a healthy way in the new environment despite being linguistically highly functional (Brown, 1980, pg.42). It seems, then, that the phase of culture shock may be an important developmental stage of communicative competence.

Many factors affect the severity of acculturation. Some people may pass through all of the stages of adjustment and begin assimilating in as little as three months, while others may be stuck in culture shock for as long as one year (Hofstede 1991, p.210). Occasionally, people may never move out of culture shock, and in extreme cases it can debilitate a person to the point of a nervous breakdown (Weltman, 1987).

If a visitor has no reprieve from culture shock, then a number of troubling response behaviors may arise: avoidance, withdrawal, acute

criticism of the host culture, stereotypes and prejudice. Naturally, these occur as a way to protect the visitor from over-expending energy and give the visitor a break from unrelenting anxiety (Barna, 1976). However, if they continue, then these behaviors become problems in themselves. Obviously, if a visitor acts in a hostile manner, it is likely that the host will respond in kind.

Barna says that teaching about culture shock seems to enable people to better cope with the problems it causes (1976. p.3). Both Weltman (1987) and Oberg (1961) write that the first step in gaining insight into culture shock is to learn about the nature of culture. Weltman (1987) discusses some of the problems common to programs that prepare people for overseas living. He claims that such programs often only provide copious lists of "Do's" and "Do nots" about the culture. These lists may relieve some anxiety, but they do little to prepare a person for acculturation. One of his suggestions is that training programs should expose students to information such as the list of communication variables compiled by Samovar and Porter (1972).

For ESL teachers, dealing with culture shock is an everyday occurence. Often students leave their native countries with no overt knowledge of what is in store for them psychologically. For teachers of lower level students, this can be especially challenging as most materials dealing with culture shock demand somewhat higher levels of English proficiency. Teachers and trainers often use one or more of the following methods for teaching students about culture shock: simulation, mini-drama, study of literature, ESL reading units, discussion/processing.

Teaching suggestions

A simulation is an experiential teaching tool where the teacher creates an environment similar to the one he or she wishes the student

to experience. Often, the results are dramatic. Two of the most well-known simulations used to teach about culture adjustment are "Barnga" (Thiagaranajan, 1990) and the more elaborate "Bafa Bafa" (Shirts, 1974). Although both of these can be tailored to meet the needs of low-intermediate students, they are time consuming to set up and debrief. Also, frequently simulations do not give explicit information about the process of acculturation, although it is quite easy to provide supplementary information at the end of such an experience or on the following day.

H. Ned Seelye (1992) describes a unique method of mini-drama created by Raymond L. Gorden to teach about culture shock . The episodes unfold in a dramatic way and seem to evoke strong reaction. He breaks up his mini-dramas into three to five parts. Each part contains one or more examples of intercultural miscommunication. The real cause of the misunderstanding doesn't become clear until the last episode (Seelye, 1992, p.105). The surprise element of the misunderstanding and the discussions following each episode make this a powerful teaching tool. Seelye (1992) also suggests using literature as a means to create empathy and teach about culture shock. His idea is that through studying characters who are experiencing cultural adjustment, students will come to a deeper understanding of culture shock and cultural conflict. Although his idea sounds interesting and effective, it may be difficult to find appropriate texts for lower level students.

Carol Archer has developed a strategy to help both students and teachers process "culture bumps." She defines a culture bump as a short episode of cultural conflict that occurs naturally when two different cultures interact (1986, p.170). Archer's method of processing helps the "processor" to depersonalize the conflict and analyze what happened objectively. The steps of this process are as follows:

1) Pinpoint some time when I (the processor) have felt "different or noticed something "different" when I was talking to someone from another country.
2) Define the situation.
3) List the behaviors of the other person.
4) List my behavior.
5) List my feelings in that situation.
6) List the behavior I expect from people in my own country in that same situation.
7) Reflect on the underlying value in my culture that prompts that behavior (Archer, 1986, p. 171-172).

After processing a culture bump this way, students participate in dicussions or create mini-dramas demonstrating the underlying cause of the misunderstanding. Archer's method of processing culture bumps appears to be a useful and creative tool for the language classroom.

Teachers at Mukogawa Fort Wright Institute in Spokane, Washington devised a unit to teach culture shock to students at the low to high intermediate levels. The unit is divided into five steps:

Step 1) Students are given a one page reading that describes culture shock and divides it into four phases: honeymoon, culture shock, acceptance, and acculturation.

Step 2) Students listen to "Susan's Letters" (Dale 1993). This is a set of four audio-taped letters from a fictitious character named "Susan." During "Susan's" one year stint in Japan, she sent these taped letters to her friend in the United States. Each letter corresponds to one of the four stages of culture adjustment. The letters are played one at a time. After each letter, the teacher does a quick comprehension check and then elicits adjectives

from the student describing how "Susan" felt in that particular letter. After listening to all four letters, the students have a clear list of the symptoms of culture shock and the other stages of adjustment.

Step 3) Following "Susan's Letters," the students participate in a brief role-play called "Counselor, Counselor" (Liptak, 1992). Half of the students receive role cards that describe a foreign student in some stage of cultural adjustment. There are six different role cards of this kind. The other half are given the role of "counselor" or "student advisor." A milling activity ensues where the counselors talk to as many students as possible in the alotted time and try to decide who is experiencing culture shock. The activity ends with all the counselors trying to name all of the "students" suffering from culture shock.

Step 4) To debrief these activities a discussion is led of possible strategies for coping with culture shock. A student- generated list of ideas is created.

Step 5) Several days or weeks following the above activities, students are led through the simulation "Barnga."

The objectives of these activities are to give students experience identifying the symptoms of culture shock, and "firsthand" experience at learning how they may cope with it. As a unit, the activities work well to introduce the concept of cultural adjustment and may help students identify culture shock in themselves.

The literature suggests that culture shock is a complex mixture of cognitive, physiological and psychological activity. The full implications

of its relationship to language learning are not yet known. Teachers of lower level students can successfully teach their students about culture shock through a variety of techniques, although many current ESL materials are aimed at more advanced students.

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